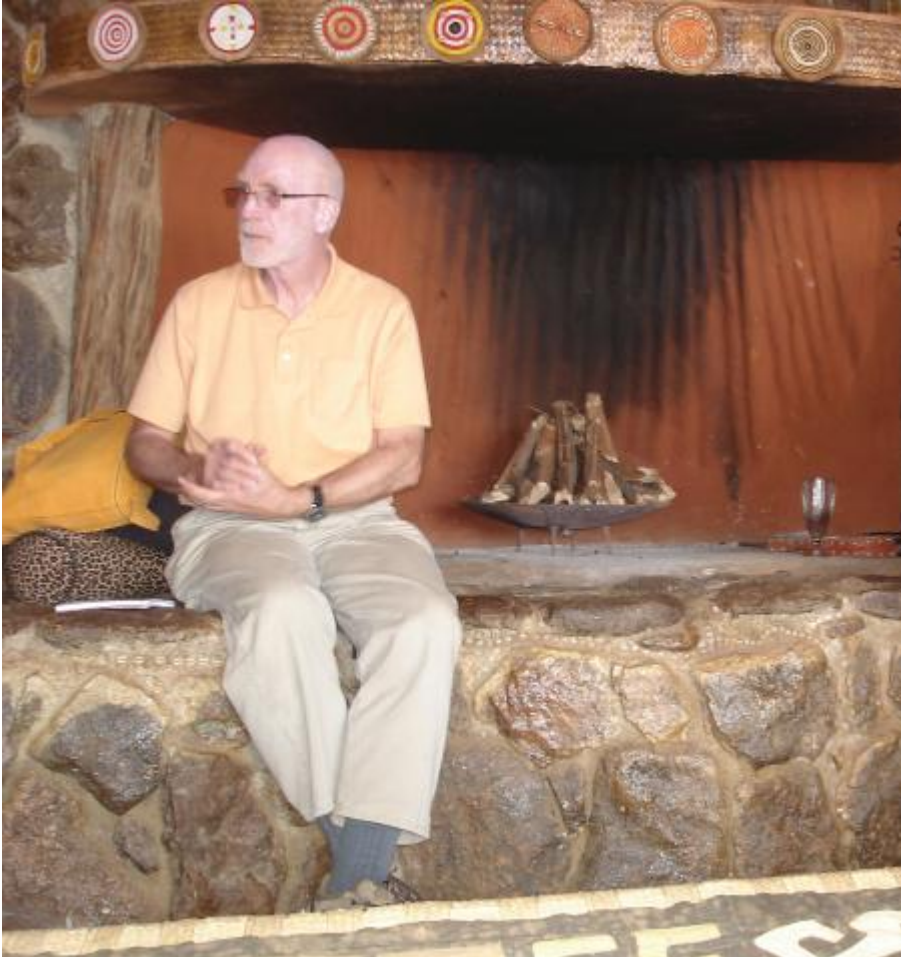


Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 13, 2012 at 1:07pm

Trip to Africa provides brush with nature, beginnings of a good joke

by Tom Roberts



Swami Atmarupananda (NCR photo/Tom Roberts)

First person

I'm just back from a week and a half in Kenya, much of it spent at the Laikipia Nature Conservancy, a 100,000-acre game preserve in the northern part of the country and site of a gathering observing the 10th anniversary of the founding of the Global Peace Initiative of Women.

The gathering, "Awakening the Healing Heart: Transforming Communities through Love and Compassion," was conducted over eight days, beginning with a daylong session at the United Nations Information Centre in Nairobi.

One of the forces behind the initiative is Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister, who gave a stirring presentation at the U.N. center. The next day, she made the more-than-six-hour trip in a van from Nairobi, about 5,280 feet above sea level, and climbed to 7,000 feet to reach the conservancy. The last portion of the trip was about an hour across jolting and dusty unpaved roads.

It is not overstating the case to say Chittister will go to the ends of the earth in support of causes she believes in. She has been active as U.S. co-chair of the organization founded by Dena Merriam, who has been long involved in global peace and reconciliation efforts, and has been one of the forces behind the initiative's examination of issues of peace, particularly, though not exclusively, from a woman's perspective.

The initiative, a kind of think tank, is distinctive for its deeply religious and broadly ecumenical approach. The 80 people from 25 countries included lay practitioners of Buddhism and Hinduism as well as Buddhist monks, Buddhist nuns, Hindu Swamis, Catholic nuns, Protestant ministers, Muslims, a Jewish social anthropologist, a Palestinian psychosocial therapist, African physicians who practice traditional Western medicine as well as one who is a traditional healer, an African chief who is a herbalist and spiritualist, humanists, at least one theosophist and a fair sampling, in religious terms, of none of the above. Many of those attending could also be described by the remarkable work they do advocating and working for justice and human rights, often among some of the most unjust, not to mention complex, situations on the globe. I'll be writing in more detail about the content of the conference for an upcoming print edition of *NCR*.

In the meantime, some personal vignettes:

Beyond the compelling conversations I sat in on, my brief experience in this remote corner of Africa was intriguing for a host of reasons, not least of which was the experience of a total detachment from all the electronic means of communication that have become an indispensable part of everyday life.

Under this particular patch of African sky, the night was profoundly quiet, the dark impenetrable except by stars and moonlight, and the lack of human interference in the landscape at times became an unsettling experience of a balance -- we were far outnumbered by beasts that we were reminded were wild, dangerous and unpredictable -- that was certainly alien to this visitor. I find KOA campgrounds just off the highways inhospitable. Our campground in Kenya, though unexpectedly comfortable, was but a dot carved out of the immensity of the reserve.

In the safari tent I shared with California-based Swami Atmarupananda (he kindly allowed us all to call him Swami A), none of the gadgets to which we were so accustomed worked. Noticeably absent were the tiny red, blue and green lights that at home let us know that our connections to everywhere are charging or ready for use. For more than four days, computer and phone lay silent. I couldn't access the noise of my

culture, the inanities of electoral politics, the clatter of the institutional church trying yet again to find its footing in a tumultuous political arena, and none of it could gain access to me. How quickly those debates, which take so much time and energy at home, faded, like dew on a savannah, gone by mid-morning. More than faded -- they seemed silly at times in comparison to the stories of working on reconciliation in places like Rwanda and Sudan and now South Sudan, in Uganda, in places where lives seem at stake daily, where threats to religious liberty are real and often deadly, not a manufactured tactic to gain a political edge.

So much of the work is by women for women and children, always the most vulnerable and always the majority of victims in men's wars.

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As I wandered across an open meadow in the dark the first night, trying with a tiny flashlight to find my new lodgings, I thought I had come halfway around the world to live my worst nightmare. Not only am I, as I've already confessed, a non-camper, I confess also that I have no sense of direction. Even in the middle of a metropolis with street signs and street lights and sidewalks full of people and a grid I actually know in my head, I can get turned around in a way that should only happen if there were, in fact, some force that could actually lift up whole city blocks and relocate them without anyone noticing. Yes, I'm that bad, and of an age that I can freely admit it.

So here, on an African plain on a cloudy, moonless night, inky black and no street signs, the few buildings that are permanent and the tents that will be taken up at the end of this conference all looking terribly alike and almost unseen beyond a dozen yards or so, I can imagine myself ... well, no, I don't want to imagine that. And there it is, they were nice enough to put a little sign out front with my name on it. I find my tent, my home for the next few days.

Swami A turns out to be a pleasant fellow, serious but with an easy sense of humor, who obliges this questioner and tells of his spiritual journey. He's been a monk of the Ramakrishna Order of India for more than 40 years and spent years in India, according to his bio, engaged in spiritual and scholastic training and learning Sanskrit, Bengali and Hindi. He has also served a number of U.S. communities in the Vendanta tradition before taking his current position as head of the Ramakrishna Monastery in Trabuco Canyon, Calif.

We are joined on the second day by Bob Maat, a physician's assistant and former Jesuit brother who, through a series of events, including one that he considers a major betrayal of the order's mission, and an extended spiritual search, has found his place resting in what he terms a "God of no names." He has been living for years in a Buddhist monastery in Cambodia, where he first arrived decades ago to work with refugees and victims of the Khmer Rouge.

I'll be writing a more extensive profile of Bob for *NCR* in the coming weeks. It's enough here to say he now lives the life of an ascetic mendicant and though he has witnessed extremes of human misery and inhumanity, he has a wonderful sense of humor and a big, distinctive laugh that seems always close to the surface.

He opted for our lumpy tent floor on a thin mat instead of a dorm where he had been staying so that he could go out to meditate early in the morning without disturbing anyone.

It was on a morning when Bob and Swami A had been outside meditating in the grayest of early morning lights that I also decided to join them on the "porch" of our tent. Immediately a line -- an opening to a joke perhaps -- ran through my head: A Hindu, a Buddhist and a Catholic sit down to meditate ... right ... and which one has trouble clearing his mind?

I told them later I felt like the kid who went to the local gym with his basketball to find the 76ers practicing there. I was overstating a bit; the one electronic gadget that worked was my Kindle, and in this setting, *A Book of Hours*, a book of Thomas Merton's writings that I regularly read, had a deeper-than-usual resonance. In fact, it was easier to clear the mind.

It was on another morning, in the pitch-black of the 4 a.m. hour, that even Bob and the Swami were thrown off their game. Bob was alone outside meditating when the meadow filled with the deepest, most sonorous animal sound I'd ever heard. Immediately Swami A and I jumped from our beds to gaze out the tent window. It was impossible to see anything, but we kept hearing the noise, a low, deep huffing that would increase at times to a low roar. Intermittently we heard humans, too. We didn't know what it was, and it was in front of the tent and behind, at a distance and quickly closer, so close that Bob suddenly unzipped the tent opening from the bottom and scrambled in, saying, "I don't know what it is, but it sounds really big!"

The noises faded at one point to a degree that Swami A went out to try his hand at meditating, which eventually turned to trying to see what was again making the noise, to a retreat back into the tent when he realized that he was going to accomplish neither. The sounds -- and I never before would have believed that a sound from an unseen creature could convey such power -- went on for another 20 minutes then slowly faded.

Later, as it began to become light, one of the armed rangers who regularly patrol this private reservation came by to tell us that what we had heard were three lions who could have been hunting. "That is their song, always a big noise," said one of the guides.

Indeed. We first looked at each other in shock, and then we roared ourselves at the protective properties we had ascribed to the sheet of canvas that had separated us from them.

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